

Cooperate to help people, Calley says

BY STEVE BEGNOCHE, MANAGING EDITOR, *Ludington Daily News*, 6.23.15

Lt. Gov. Brian Calley praised regional cooperation as a means to serve citizens and get beyond artificial borders when speaking to the West Michigan Regional Prosperity Alliance steering committee Monday at Harborview Marina.

As a storm approached in the bay windows behind him, Calley quipped the predicted thunder, lightning and hail might add emphasis the points he had to share.

The committee represents the 13 counties in prosperity region 4 established by Gov. Rick Snyder.

According to John Weiss, chairman of the regional organization and executive director of the Grand Valley Metro Council which serves as the fiduciary agency of the group, the West Michigan Region has 1.4 million residents making it the second most populated region after southeastern Michigan's prosperity region. Geographically, it is the second largest region after the Upper Peninsula's prosperity region. Region 4 covers 130 miles of Lake Michigan shoreline and is roughly the size of New Jersey, he said.

Calley praised west Michigan as a place where cooperation across political borders had a headstart over other regions of Michigan.

"It seems to happen a lot more naturally in this part of the state than other places," Calley said.

The state, he said, is no longer operating in a crisis mode as it had been.

This month, the state's 2016 budget of \$54 billion was completed and approved — almost five months before the Oct. 1 start of the state's fiscal year. "Five months early is now the new on time," he said, comparing that to a 2009 budget passing that happened after midnight real time on what would have been the morning of Oct. 1. However, the House of Representatives chamber's clock is the keeper of official House time and it was stopped for about a half hour before midnight so, according to the House time, the budget was passed on time.

Lawmakers that night celebrated avoiding a government shutdown, Calley said. "They acted like it was a big accomplishment to have it done on the day it was supposed to start," he said.

By moving beyond crisis management, state government today can work on long term problems that couldn't be addressed in a time of perpetual crisis management, Calley said. "We can focus on the hardest problems," he said. The state now can accomplish more than what would have seemed possible during in the days of crisis management.

The Snyder administration approach is to eliminate "silos" of government and thinking that he said can prevent the government from actually helping move people towards independence.

He cited having the Michigan Economic Development Corporation, which is not beholden to all the same procedures as a government agency, find a way to address a problem of why, even in times of "full employment" there are people who are unemployed. The areas of highest unemployment often have the highest crime, he said, so a pilot program was established through MEDC to try to remove the barriers that the unemployed in Detroit, Saginaw, Flint and Pontiac experience and to find employers to give these people a chance to work.

The single largest barrier to working for these people, Calley said, is lack of reliable transportation. Substance abuse disorders, untreated mental health, or having skills no longer in demand but with no access to sources of learning new skills nearby, were other barriers to employment.

The program set \$11 an hour as a goal for these jobs.

After a year, the jobs found for people who entered it averaged \$10.50 an hour and employers reported those hired actually were retained at a higher rate than typical employees.

The result, he said, is when people who are structurally unemployed are provided wraparound services, they can get and hold a job and move towards independence rather than be maintained in a government assistance program with no way out.

The lesson, he said, is to meet people where they are, and work with them there.

Government and agencies, he said, can box themselves into artificial boundaries. "We need to make sure we serve people in ways that are relevant to how they live their lives," he said. "If we're not connected in a meaningful way, we are not being there for our own citizens." Thus, he said, the administration melded two large agencies - the previously separate departments of human services (DHS) and community health into the new department of health and human services.

The idea, he said, wasn't about saving administrative money, though there might be some savings.

Rather, it was to help people that he said too often get sidetracked into programs that can keep them sidetracked and find what works so they get the opportunity to find work and leave government programs.

The measure of success, he said, is "are we helping them be more independent?" He called that a person and citizen centered approach.

"What is needed to move this person forward toward more independence?" is the question, he said.

Answer that, and do what is determined to be needed is an approach that moves people away from artificial restrictions, he said.

"We believe it can be hugely effective," Calley said, adding, it's not as easy as it may have made it sound. One difficulty is creating a culture in government supportive of that. Another challenge is in breaking down "pretty tough" boundaries within state government. "We are largely serving the same people." Calley told the members of the task force.

Lake Michigan, he said, pointing out the window down the Ludington channel toward the big lake, "is our recreation." As a resident of Ionia County Calley said, "there's no question the lake benefits me on the eastern edge of the region." Lake Michigan, he said, provides a good resource to organize around.

He encouraged the participants to be "intentional" about their work, but not to fall into the trap that they support regionalism as long as nothing changes for them.

He suggested the question organization and government representatives should ask is, does an idea serve the people they represent?

If the answer is yes, it is good, and they should support a change, Calley said. Be sensitive, but be flexible in getting to a place that says yes, Calley advised.



Lt. Governor Brian Calley talks with Kathy Maclean, president and CEO of the Ludington & Scottville Area Chamber of Commerce, and Crystal Young, director of West Shore Community College's Business Opportunity Center, Monday.



Mason County Administrator Fabian Knizacky, Joe Lenius, Mason County Commissioner Wally Taranko, and Rachelle Enbody, Pere Marquette Township clerk, all raise their hands when asked by John Weiss if they are from Mason County.



Lt. Governor Brian Calley and his wife, Julie, greet guests at Monday's steering committee meeting.



John Weiss introduces the guest speakers at Monday's West Michigan Regional Prosperity Alliance steering committee meeting held at Harbor View Marina in Ludington.